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ABSTRACT

During a year-long ethnography in a workplace setting (a non-profit job and literacy training agency), a study examined how managers learned new genres required in their jobs. There were 2 research questions: (1) what are the specific aspects of a genre to be mastered for effective written communication? and (2) what is the developmental process for acquiring written expertise in a given genre? Data collection involved participant observation of a subject one day a week over a year at a job resource center, collection of all drafts of press releases during that period, and interviews with the subject. Results correlated with the work of M. Himley (1986) and J. A. Langer (1985) in that surface features such as physical format and jargon were picked up first; issues of appropriate content and rhetorical strategies were understood and utilized only with repeated practice. The data contests C. Berkenkotter's work (1988) in that the subject seemed to be learning on both a procedural and a declarative level simultaneously; in other words, the subject was learning at the same time how to write generally in a particular field and how to write specifically in a particular genre. Additional findings show that the subject encountered practices in the workplace inconsistent with what she had learned in school. (Contains 18 references.) (TB)

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Learning the Genre of the Press Release: Developmental Processes in Adult Writers

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Research Objectives

As a byproduct of postmodern literary theory, "genre" has been revitalized and reconceived as a useful conceptual frame for discussing texts and issues of writers learning to compose. Building on the work of Bahktin (1986) and Todorov (1976), who viewed genres as tools for cultural hegemony, and Miller (1984), who reconceived genre as a rhetorical tool for social action, textual critics have examined the ways in which genres change over time because of sociohistorical influences on textual forms (Bazerman, 1988; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Researchers in composition theory have further refined the notion of genre as evidenced in communities of writers in school and workplace settings (Devitt, 1991; Schryer, 1993) and a few studies have examined actual composing processes of novices in relation to acquiring genre knowledge(Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994; Himley, 1986; Langer, 1985). However, there is a large gap in our understanding of what knowledge is required to master a given genre, and how that knowledge is gained by adult learners at advanced levels of literacy—especially in professional settings.

During a year-long ethnography in a workplace setting (a non-profit joband literacy training agency), I examined how managers learned new genres required in their jobs. Specifically, I sought to answer two research questions: 1) what are the specific aspects of a genre one must master for effective written communication? and 2) what is the developmental process for acquiring writing expertise in a given genre? In this talk, I will present a portion of the data from the larger study which gives insight into one writer's developmental process in mastering the genre of the press release over a twelve-month period.

Theoretical Framework

Given these research questions, two theoretical frames are required to inform the collection and analysis of data--one, to understand the makeup of genre knowledge, and the other, to provide a way to understand the writer's learning process in moving from novice knowledge and behaviors to those of an expert writer handling a given genre.

Genre theory can be both broad and narrow. Some conceive genre in social and philosophical terms (Derrida, 1980; Jameson, 1981), as a repository of cultural values and as cultural tool; others (Fowler, 1982) view genre more as a set of interwoven textual features, the sum of a number of smaller parts. And from composition pedagogy come further ways of catgorizing texts (the discourse modes, rhetorical aims, etc.), all of which have some usefulness, but none of which captures the full range of textual features an expert writer can manipulate in a given genre. For purposes of understanding what writers new to a given genre must master, it is useful to take a middle ground, between Fowler's list of 15 different characteristics of genre, and the abstract characterizations of genre by literary theorists and compositionists. By looking at content knowledge, rhetorical knowledge (writer/reader aims and purposes), structural knowledge, and linguistic features a
s overlapping, yet discreet aspecs of genre,[1] we can get a clearer picture of exactly what textual features a novice writer, or someone learning a genre for the first time, must master.

[1] I derived this four-part breakdown of genre features from a definition by Slevin

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The second area of theoretical concern is the how of learning new genres: in what sequence (if any) are the various features learned, and how are they learned? Cognitive psychologists who have studied the differences between expert and novice problem-solving strategies (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) have found that novices handle new situations (learning to drive a car, or play chess, or solve a physics problem) by applying a general rule to the situation, whereas experts have a much richer schematic of declarative and procedural knowledge to apply in a given situation. The latter have not only general knowledge, but also really specific knowledge applicable in a "local" situation which is drawn on more heavily than abstract principles. In relation to mastering a given genre of written communication, the expert-novice differentiation would suggest that a novice would first learn the very surface and general featues of a genre, moving over time to more specific or fine-grained understandings and uses of language as manifested in a given genre.

Recent work in situated cognition (Lave, 1991; Lave, Murtaugh, & de la Rocha, 1984) suggests a very concrete, local dimension to learning, which means the writer's method of learnng arises from the social conetxt, so that the particular tools (models, watching others, etc.) a writer uses to learn a new genre are very situation-specific, and involve a lot of imitation of the behaviors, or in this case, texts of others.

Data Sources and Research Methods

Data collection involved participant observation of Ursula (not her real name) one day a week for over a year at Job Resource Center (JRC), collection of all drafts of press releases during that one year time period, and discourse-based interviews with Ursula focused on the particulars of the writing situation with a specific press release. I also interviewed a PR specialist for an expert's perspective on the genre and to get a sense of the range of ways in which the press release can be utlized towards particular communicative purposes.

Data analysis consisted of bottom-up and top-down analysis--both of textual features of the genre, and of Ursula's methods for learning the genre. Transcripts of interview data were combed for features of the genre discussed either by Ursula or the expert, and these patterns were compared with the conceptual framework for understanding genre derived from Slevin (1988). A chronological analysis of the writing samples revealed developmental trends in Ursula's growing understanding of the genre, and retrospective accounts of the composing process for these texts were analyzed for features of the learning process that were unique to the particular social context for composing.

Results

Breaking a genre into its component features and analyzing acquisition of those features over time in the case of Ursula's learning to write press releases revealed a developmental pattern for acquisition of genre similar to that reported in a few studies of children acquiring genre knowledge. (Himley, 1986; Langer, 1985). Surface features such as physical format, and jargon were picked up first. Issues of appropriate content and rhetorical strategies were understood and utilized only with repeated practice in the genre, and socializaion into the norms of the discourse commmunties using the genre.

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that genre is "an inherited social form, a discursive institution, within which a writer fuses meaning, structure, linguistic features, and pragmatic purposes and effects." (p. 5)

On the other hand, this data contradict the study of a graduate student learning to write in the social sciences (Berkenkotter, et al., 1988), in which knowledge) being mastered first and procedural knowledge (knowledge of "how" to compose in the genre) came more slowly. Ursula was learning about press releases at both proedural and declarative levels simultaneously.

With regard to learning a new genre in the setting of this particular non-profit agency, tracking the learning process for the various elements of the genre was revealing both of the differences between expert and novice genre knowledge, and of the ways in which the cognitive process of learning to write in a new genre is rooted in the social situation in which the writer/learner is working.

There was an important additional finding—a case of negative transfer of learning. Values Ursula was familiar with from the academic discourse community were at odds with the values of the two discourse communities she had to interface with via the press release. Both the business community and the media—utilized what Ursula called the "schmooze factor" in much of their communications, including the press release. Values of the academic community—the emphasis on facts and objectivity—which Ursula was well-indoctrinated in from her years of schooling—created a conflict for Ursula in adapting to the rhetorical and stylistic features of the press release.

Educational Significance

Findings from the study suggest at least three ramifications for theory building in composition studies and curriculum development at advanced levels of instruction. This research

- instantiates the concept of expert versus novice levels of knowledge and problem-solving in adults at advanced levels of literacy

- demonstrates the value of operationalizing a definition of genre for instructional purposes, and

- illuminates the developmental process at the whole text level of composing, which can aide in sequencing and scaffolding instructional tasks.

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